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ABSTRACT

This report surveys the significance and implications of the question of how the knowledge of past reading instruction might engender a better understanding of contemporary practices and help to resolve current problems. The report advocates the necessity of educator/historians and outlines the requirements for their dual training and experience. Among specific methodological criteria proposed for engaging in and evaluating historical research in reading instruction are the following: research question and objective, source, utilization of sources, terminology, the written report, and bibliography. (Author/DF)

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Methodology of Historical Research of Reading Instruction: Principles and Criteria

June Russell Gilstad

Educational Consulting and Research

Mention of historical research, unlike some other modes of investigation, frequently engenders among educators feelings of ambivalence and unease. Questions are often raised about the reliability of sources, data, design, and utility of such research. The apparent absence of quantification and tangibility tends to arouse suspicion. Although generally inclined to respect toward the discipline history, many in the social sciences including educators fear that historical research conducted in their own field may not really be quite legitimate, that it may not be "scientific."

To a certain extent this sense of distrust has been justified. The oft employed method of searching for and lifting from context "facts" which were carefully selected does not compare favorably with the empirical criterion for representative sampling. What historical information has been collected has commonly been set forth in rhetorical arguments rather than descriptive scientific reports. All too frequently the objective has been support and justification for current opinion, practices, or projects, rather than the increase of knowledge.

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In spite of all this, unmitigated distrust of all knowledge, per se, about past events, trends, persons, etc., is certainly not warranted. In fact, total rejection of historical knowledge becomes less and less tenable with the passage of each decade of the twentieth century. This is due to the fact that throughout this period ever increasing quantities of primary sources have become available to historians. Documents and artifacts of sometimes unbelievable quality and variety as well as quantity are now extant for every major region and period of interest to intellectual and social historians.

Clearly, reading educators ought to acquire their just share of the knowledge residing in this ever expanding collection. However, in order to benefit from this potential bonanza, three prerequisites must be fulfilled. It is necessary to have 1) a realistic general understanding of what historical knowledge is, its value and utility; 2) a corps of adequately experienced and trained educator-historians; and 3) a set of methodological criteria which investigators may employ in historical research and with which others may evaluate historical research reports.

The major concern of this paper is the third requirement: methodological criteria. However, because the concept of the objective of historical research and the skills necessary to the historian are in fact an intrinsic part of the methodology, a few words must first be said about them.

The Concept of Historical Knowledge

One of the more commonly heard academic questions is the general one, What is useful about the study of history? Many broad, often philosophical answers to this question have been proposed: that problems similar to our own have been encountered previously, that we ought to learn from the mistakes of the past, etc. Such generalizations have their own merit; however, as reading educators we ought to be concerned with a more specific question about historical research.

Reading educators ought to inquire, How can knowledge of past reading instruction enable us to have a better understanding of contemporary practices and help to resolve current problems? The answer is that the most extensive and richest source of specific information about current practices is to be obtained from those who initiated and transmitted them to us, namely our predecessors. Information from them will enable us to distinguish specific, inherited practices from one another and, knowing their origins, to develop a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of them.

It should not be expected, however, that such historical knowledge will directly and explicitly resolve all our contemporary questions and problems. Due to various alterations and cumulative effects brought about by the passage of time, many of our difficulties actually arise from conflicts currently existing between practices and beliefs which were inserted into the tradition at different times in the past, each of which was initiated for some particular and timely

reason. In addition, other factors specific to our own time must also be taken into account. Historical knowledge, by enabling us to distinguish and understand our current procedures, can provide an enlightened perspective and realistic foundation for contemporary investigations of those interrelationships and conflicts.

Consequently, reading educators need historical knowledge about specific teachers who actually lived and worked in classrooms. We need to know about the curriculum they actually taught and the instructional techniques employed by them. We need to know when, why, and how specific curricula and techniques changed. In order to achieve this end, it is necessary that a distinction be made between the published works, opinions, and practices of professional classroom instructors and those of other persons who have had only an interest in curriculum or instruction, for whatever reason.

Finally, it should be noted that such historical knowledge about our predecessors will provide us a more realistic perspective of our own profession. Cliches are often heard to the effect that reading is a basic and essential subject. Beyond that, however, little thought is given to the fact that among all the curricula, the reading-writing curriculum is the oldest in academia. Given that writing is known to have been in use for at least 5000 years, from 3100 B.C., then the reading-writing curriculum must be of an equal age. However, our professional textbooks, our literature, our traditions tell us very little about that long span of time. They don't tell us who the most outstanding instructors were. We don't

know where, how, and what they taught. Our tradition doesn't tell us when, why, and how the original curriculum was altered, or the intent or consequences of those alterations. As philosophers harken to Aristotle, astronomers to Ptolomy and Copernicus, physicians to Hippocrates and Galen, so reading educators ought to know the names of their progenitors.

Educator-Historians

As with any other type of scientific investigation, the result of historical research is directly affected by two basic factors: 1) the character and quality of the research question, and 2) the technical knowledge and skill which the investigator is able to bring to his research. This implies that it is necessary for an historian of reading instruction to function professionally in two disciplines.

On the one hand, the historian of reading instruction should be a professional reading educator, that is, one who is trained and experienced with the object of investigation, classroom instruction in reading. Personal, first hand acquaintance with current practices, terms, and views enables the historian to identify and focus upon questions and topics which are contemporary and realistic. Furthermore, direct knowledge and experience of the reading classroom significantly enhances the historical investigator's capacity to comprehend the contents of primary source documents. In this particular research, professional kinship shared by the historian with primary source writers produces a basic commonality of experience with the content and objectives of instruction, the learner, etc. The educator-historian of

reading instruction thus has an initial advantage in searching out underlying assumptions, comprehending allusions, understanding motives, classroom problems, etc., discussed in those documents.

On the other hand, the investigator needs to be a professional historian, in the sense that he is trained and experienced in the use of standard historical research tools and techniques. He needs to know how to locate, evaluate, and utilize primary source documents. He must also be skilled in the judicious use of relevant secondary source materials. Ultimately, he must be able to organize and communicate findings and interpretations of detailed study with clarity and in a literary manner comprehensible and familiar to other historians as well as to reading educators.

Such an investigator must also be an historian in the sense that he has and continues to acquire background knowledge about whatever period he is studying. In the case of the history of reading instruction, the range of such affairs is quite broad. Accurate reading and interpretation of primary source documents frequently depend upon knowledge of meanings and derivations ascribed to terms borrowed from academic, social,political, theological, and scientific discourse of various periods and locales. Such linguistic knowledge is, of course, dependent upon an extensive accumulation of specific information about the social, economic, intellectual, and religious affairs of a period, in addition to more traditional knowledge of political and military matters.

Because the reading-writing curriculum is so ancient and so pivotal relative to general academic and intellectual affairs, the historian of

reading instruction is required to search the literature of a multitude of contemporary disciplines in order to locate the primary source documents relevant to his own discipline and investigation. This wide ranging search is necessitated in part by the fact that until the nineteenth century basic reading instruction was not included in the curriculum of institutional schools. Furthermore, instruction in what now might be called intermediate and advanced reading was formerly included within various aspects of the curricula of the Latin grammar school and the college. Included among the discplines whose literatures may profitably be searched by an historian of reading instruction are those of the ancient, medieval, and early modern languages, grammar, rhetoric and logic, as well as alphabetology, anthropology, archaeology, paleography, papyriology, epigraphy, theology, sociology, economics, medieval studies, historical linguistics, American colonial and nineteenth century studies. Quantities of very high quality documents are available at this moment in all of these as well as other disciplines.

Having located relevant primary documents in such disciplines, historians of reading instruction must obviously be able to acquire whatever technical knowledge and opinion are currently extant within the field and relevant to the particular document. The quantity and reliability of such knowledge vary widely from document to document and field to field. Nevertheless, it must always be taken into account. Acquisition, evaluation, and utilization of such knowledge usually entail learning about, if not actually acquiring, technical skills and terminology specific to the particular discipline.

Thus, the historian of reading instruction needs to be able to acquire many technical skills and vocabularies and to sojourn in many sections of the research library. He needs to have the professional perceptions and experience of a reading instructor in order to construct relevant research questions and to increase his understanding of primary source writers. He needs to employ historical research tools and techniques in order to locate, evaluate, and interpret the historical materials from whence come his data. Finally, the historian of reading instruction must be able to search the literature of many other modern disciplines for relevant secondary sources.

Methodological Criteria

The majority of educational research in recent decades having been quantitative, reading educators have come to rely upon statistical criteria for evaluating research reports. Although such criteria may be applicable to some historical studies, they would be misapplied to many others. Reading educators therefore need a new set of criteria by which they may 1) evaluate the quality of historical research reports in their own field, and 2) extract from them the maximum amount of useful information and knowledge.

1. Research question and objective. The traditional practice initially inherited from rhetoricians has been to search among past events, practices, or statements for specific examples which could be cited in support of some particular point currently being argued. Increasingly, since the mid-eighteenth century, the over-riding

objective of rhetoric came to be persuasion, at the expense of enlightenment and accuracy. Reliance upon emotive allusions and terminology exceeded presentations of actual evidence and reasoned analysis.

Examples of this school of rhetoric may be found among the public addresses and writings of the medieval, Renaissance, and modern periods. Of particular concern to reading educators and historians is the fact that this rhetorical device was heavily employed by many public figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including social scientists and educators.

In consequence of the reliance on this type of rhetoric, contemporary reading educators and historians are faced with two primary obstacles. First, our basic knowledge of educational events, practices, and personages of the past has been distorted and restricted by this practice. Second, the three step technique employed by rhetoricians has been mistaken as suitable to historical research. The three steps are: 1) a selective search for specific "useful" instances in the past, 2) extraction of such instances from context, and 3) their submission to contemporaries as valid historical data, directly relevant to current affairs.

Because of this tradition we must consciously guard against research questions which entail injecting past statements, practices, or events into contemporary contexts. Similarly, we must not accept research questions which rest on the assumption that contemporary terminology, perspectives, objectives, problems, etc., are identical with

those of any other period. Finally, it should be noted that research questions which permit searching the past for evidence or proof of the previous existence of specific contemporary conditions or problems are also of the old tradition.

Historical research topics are certain to evolve from matters of current interest. However, historical research questions which can lead to useful and viable knowledge of the past are those rooted in a singular and firm intention to investigate and understand the writings and activities of our predecessors within the true context of their own time. Therefore, research objectives ought to be clearly stated and research questions ought to indicate that the past will not be treated as if it were the present, nor the present injected into the past.

2. Sources. Throughout this century the quantity of primary and secondary sources which are available and useful to an historian of reading instruction have steadily multiplied. From the nineteenth century to the present day, a veritable flood of documents and inscriptions from ancient and classical times has come to light. A great many, but by no means all, of these are now accessable for study by intellectual and social historians. During the last two decades, hundreds of rare Renaissance and early modern works have become available as reprints or on microfilm. Many of these primary source documents are being studied by a variety of social and intellectual historians. Consequently, the last several decades have seen a steady increase in the quantity,

quality, and variety of secondary source materials, which can be very useful to historians of reading instruction. Among the disciplines in which such works may be found are social, intellectual, and economic history; demography; historical linguistics; history and philosophy of science; sociology; modern German, French, and English linguistics.

Finally, there remains one other category of primary source materials, i.e., school books, especially teacher's editions and methods texts published during the last 150 years. Many of these sources are still in private hands and used book stores throughout the United States and Canada. Some are on shelves in research libraries and others in special commercial and academic collections.

The very existence of such quantities of relatively untouched primary and secondary sources ought to be reflected in the historiography of reading instruction in two ways. First, there ought to be an increase in the number of in-depth studies of individual works of particular importance or distinction and of specific periods of special interest. Second, singular documents which have been used as key references in our several comprehensive histories ought to be studied and interpreted comparatively, within the context of their own time.

Perhaps it should be noted here that many of these primary sources are contained in books which are themselves physically old and fragile. Most are either long out of print or expensive replications of works which actually reside in rare book libraries. The reprinted works, while adequately covered, were not sent forth in heavy duty bindings. Due to all these factors it would certainly be foolhardy to send troops

of undergraduate and graduate students off to libraries with assignments which entail heavy use of books which are already in delicate condition and irreplacable. Consequently, it might be wise to consider, for conservation's sake, making photocopies available to students, while the original texts are held in safekeeping.

3. Utilization of sources. Every effort must be made by the historian of reading instruction to comprehend the message the author of a primary source was intending both overtly and covertly to convey to his contemporaries. Furthermore, the actual meaning of the work and its effect on the author's contemporaries and posterity must also be determined.

Each primary source located by an historian must be studied critically, both externally and internally. An inquiry must be made into such external matters as the type and intended initial purpose of the document; authorship; authenticity; special linguistic, writing, or printing factors and features; publication and reprint record; physical history; etc.

The internal content of the document must subsequently be studied in light of the results of the external examination, as well as relevant background information already known or concurrently acquired by the historian. The document must be studied conceptually in an effort to determine the author's intended message, i.e., whether relative to his own time it was accurate, comprehensive, biased, credible, consistent, distorted, probable, contradictory, etc.

The procedures to be employed by an historian in studying primary sources

are among the easiest to list and describe. They are among the most difficult to accomplish. In fact, they require long, tedious hours in libraries, reading, taking detailed notes, rereading, comparing, thinking, organizing, filing, and analyzing. Primary sources must be studied in detail one at a time, yet rarely can a single work or author be adequately understood by itself. Sometimes many works of a particular era must be studied in series and then restudied before the meaning of a certain key term or phrase becomes adequately clear. Persistence, intuition, organization, a certain amount of luck, and enormous quantities of time are required for the study of these sources. The ultimate reward, perhaps the ultimate scholarly high, comes periodically when, while reading a work written perhaps several hundred years ago, one has the feeling of meeting the mind and personality of that author long dead, and that for a short time one shares his perception of the world as it was thought to be in his time.

Secondary sources can be utilized in two ways. They can provide considerable technical information about the physical history of documents of certain eras, in particular those of ancient, classical, and medieval times. When transcriptions and translations are involved, secondary sources can provide authoritative information about discrepancies, variations, and other related matters. These sources must, of course, always be evaluated by the historian of reading instruction for relevancy to his study and field and for consistency and credibility in relation to the total body of knowledge already accumulated by his own research.

That is, the historian of reading instruction must keep in mind that secondary sources are, after all, authoritative in some other field or discipline and may not be accurate or reliable about affairs touching specifically on the history of reading instruction. About these matters historians of reading instruction must themselves ultimately be the judge.

Finally, secondary sources can also be used to develop and expand general background knowledge of social and intellectual affairs of various periods and locales. The more the historian knows about life and thought in a given period, the better he is able to evaluate and study its primary sources.

4. Terminology. As a general rule, consideration of the terminology employed in a document is part of internal criticism. However, the terminology of reading instruction, being very old, presents some special difficulties. The antiquity and continuity of the technical terminology employed by reading educators are at once a blessing and a curse. At first, to contemporaries encountering many familiar terms, primary source documents appear easy to read. They seem to be extremely relevant, directly applicable to current thoughts and affairs.

However, more often than not, the meaning or sense ascribed to a term in use today is not exactly the same as that of fifty, one hundred, four hundred, or a thousand years ago. In some cases terms have acquired new meanings more than once. Occasionally the meaning of one term cannot be adequately understood apart from the whole constellation to which it belongs. Historians of reading instruction must therefore pay special attention to the meanings of what appear to be familiar technical terms.

misunderstanding can be avoided only if readers expect and historians provide relevant descriptions of the meaning and use of such terminology whenever it is encountered.

5. The written report. Yet another tradition, an ancient one, bears upon the methodology of reading instruction research. This is the tradition that the results of historical research are written as literature. This tradition poses some problems for both the historian of reading instruction and his reader.

First, there is the obvious and visible difference in format between literary writing and the customary scientific research report. A literary format has the appearance of being a story, whereas the research report gives the impression of being factual and scientific.

Second, again according to tradition, the tone of historical writing has differed from that of scientific reporting. Scientific writers strive to reflect an attitude of objectivity toward their subject. Relatively few descriptive adjectives and adverbs are employed.

By contrast, in part influenced by the principles and objectives of persuasive rhetoric, the tone of much historical writing in the social sciences has been selective, biased, emotive. Historical writers, including historians of reading instruction, have commonly expressed an attitude of disdain toward persons as well as educational, intellectual, and social affairs of the past. Descriptive adjectives and adverbs, many of which are pejorative and denigrating, have been used extensively.

This tone and choice of descriptive terminology steadily and covertly conveys a negative message to readers. The subtle but inescapable message is that persons and conditions of the past are inherently

inferior to those of the present. This message is directly contrary to one of the most basic principles of empirical research, that investigators ought to avoid bias and prejudice. Clearly this principle should apply equally to historical research and to empirical research.

Finally, if research questions and objectives are constructed according to the principles noted earlier, then at the conclusion of their research historians ought to be in possession of two types of knowledge, that about the past, per se, and that about the present relative to the past. Even though a literary writing style may be employed, the distinction between those two types of knowledge ought to be scrupulously maintained. Contemporary readers need to be edified and other historians assisted by clear, accurate descriptions and interpretations of information obtained from historical investigations. Conclusions and implications relevant to current affairs based on such research are, however, transient and ought to be clearly distinguished.

6. Bibliography. Historians are oriented toward the use of a "bibliography" rather than the notion of "references." They routinely append bibliographies to published works. These may be in the form of a selected bibliography, a comprehensive bibliography, bibliographic notes, or a bibliographic essay. Among historians the bibliography is employed to indicate the breadth, quantity, and quality of primary and secondary sources as well as the specific authors and items by which the work is supported. Ordinarily it is not the custom to cite numerous sources in support of a single specific point within the body of a written text, when a particular item of information or point of view

is so widely known and acknowledged among historians as to be regarded as common knowledge. Citations and/or "notes" are provided, however, when the running text contains specific discourse about or rests upon a source(s) which is not generally known, is unique, or is pivotal to what is being said by the historian. These practices are techniques need to be included among those acquired and understood by both educator-historians and their readers.

Summary and Conclusion

In the past educators' scepticism about historical research was justified by the type of research objectives, methods, and reporting practices commonly employed. However, the situation has been altered in recent years by two factors: first, by the great quantity of primary source documents and artifacts which continue to flood research libraries; second, by the new historical research objectives and methods which have been summarized in this paper.

Application of these techniques to the reservoir of new primary sources and utilization of historical studies in other social sciences promise to yield much needed factual information about the beliefs and practices which constitute our inherited tradition. In addition, as a result of such historical investigations, we can also become acquainted with our professional ancestors. Although, perhaps, this is a secondary consideration, the psychological and social benefits of acquaintance

with our professional kinsmen should not be underestimated.

In order to take advantage of these opportunities, it will be necessary for some reading educators to acquire and apply a second set of research and reporting skills to an entirely new data source. In turn this will necessitate adoption into the field of a new set of criteria for the evaluation of such research.

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